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Socio-Cultural Awareness Project

Reflection Paper

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OT606 Health Care Systems

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Multi-cultural competence and knowledge about the experiences of individuals of other races, social statuses, and backgrounds are critical skills for health care professionals. As occupational therapists, we are invited into the personal lives of our clients. The ability to connect with them and to understand their unique life experiences is critical for improving outcomes. Such topics are often left out of the curriculum in health care education. There is evidence of inequality of services within health care – according to a 2002 article, “... news reports indicate that racial and ethnic minorities receive lower quality healthcare than whites, even when they are insured to the same degree and when other healthcare access-related factors, such as the ability to pay for care, are the same” (Institute of Medicine, 2002, p.1). It is our responsibility as health care providers to acknowledge this inequality and actively work to eradicate it.

My goal for this project was to improve upon my ability to understand the experience of individuals living at or below the poverty line. This goal stems from the years I spent working at the YMCA after I graduated from college. The Y offers financial assistance to individuals who are unable to afford the full cost of a membership. Part of my job was to process the financial assistance applications, which consist of a short form and income verification. This process – of collecting the appropriate income verification and discussing the financial situation of a complete stranger – was uncomfortable, and often ended with conflict or with staff members accepting questionable income verification simply to end the discussion and proceed with the membership process. While the lack of understanding that occurred can partially be attributed to the poorly run financial assistance program itself, it is also clear that the poor communication was due to a lack of knowledge, empathy and competence on our parts. I did not understand the types of public assistance available, but was embarrassed to ask. I felt uncomfortable asking individuals

about their finances when I was pretty sure we both knew that I came from a more affluent background.

In an effort to address my lack of competence in this area, I spent time researching public assistance programs in Washington State and created a brochure that outlines the basic facts and provides resources about social and health services. The brochure also provides tips for successful dialogue about the sensitive issue of finances. I hope that the brochure will be helpful to my peers, as well as to future occupational therapy students. I further educated myself through documentaries (*Welfare and Wage Slaves: Not Getting by in America*) as well as the book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich. These resources were enlightening, and opened my eyes to the reality of life for individuals working low-wage jobs. While the documentaries were difficult to watch, they were helpful as they allowed me to get a better sense for these individuals struggling to get by – for their stories and their hopes for the future.

To write the book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, author Barbara Ehrenreich left her comfortable life and spent 90 days living in three different cities, working low-wage jobs and writing about her experiences. One aspect of living near the poverty line that Ehrenreich's book highlighted was the lack of personal belongings, and the effect this had on many individuals' lives. Even when I was earning very little working at the Y, I still had resources that many others lack, such as cooking tools and professional clothes. "There are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs. If you can't put up the two months' rent you need to secure an apartment, you end up paying through the nose for a room by the week. If you have only a room, with a hot plate at best, you can't save by cooking up huge lentil stews that can be frozen for the week ahead. You eat fast food or the

hot dogs and Styrofoam cups of soup that can be microwaved in a convenience store”

(Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 27). Just by having a crock-pot, I had another tool at my advantage to make my paychecks stretch farther. Another barrier that Ehrenreich faced was finding an apartment that was furnished – at least with a bed and some clean linens. This is why so many individuals may pay more to live in hotels, or why they may live in their cars if the weather permits – finding a furnished apartment with a reasonable rent is a challenge.

These hardships tie in to the concept of chronic occupational deprivation. Lacking the basic amenities that make a home a home, lacking the tools that enable you to participate in daily life, is more difficult than many imagine. Not being able to participate in the hobbies and activities that define who we are disrupts the daily routines that are so important, especially for young children.

When I was working at the Y, I thought that the dysfunctional nature of the job was unique. I naively thought that few others had to deal with poor management, long shifts spent on foot, and a lack of appreciation. Ehrenreich’s descriptions of the jobs she worked opened my eyes to the reality that this is typical. If anything, aspects of my job at the Y were better than what most people experience. Most of Ehrenreich’s jobs (cleaning houses, waitressing, working at Wal-Mart) required her to be on her feet all day – and often without enough food or proper footwear. The amount of work expected of her, with minimal lunch and bathroom breaks, was unreasonable. As the documentary *Wage Slaves: Not Getting by in America* (2002) noted, the term “unskilled labor” is deceptive. Many such jobs are physically and mentally challenging, and require a host of new skills. Complaints to management are often not well received. In fact, the manager-employee relationship Ehrenreich highlighted was particularly striking. An aura of distrust was reflected in the drug tests, personality tests, arbitrarily changing schedules, and

video cameras recording the employee's every move. The environment becomes stressful and dehumanizing for the employee (*Wage Slaves: Not Getting by in America*, 2002).

Employers can get away with this because there is a seemingly endless supply of cheap laborers. Many have to work more than one job to make ends meet. "In the new version of the law of supply and demand, jobs are so cheap—as measured by the pay—that a worker is encouraged to take on as many of them as she possibly can (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 60). The documentary *Wage Slaves: Not Getting by in America* (2002) points out that low wage jobs become a trap. Despite the low pay and poor working conditions, many individuals do not leave because they cannot afford the risk of looking for a new job. If you are living paycheck to paycheck, even a few weeks without pay could be devastating. It may be impossible to look for a new job if you don't have a phone or reliable transportation.

The two documentaries that I watched provided contrasting views of individuals living in poverty – in 1975 and in 2002. *Welfare* (1975) followed the daily activities of a New York City welfare office. What struck me most about this portrayal was *who* was present – people of color, women, babies, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities. I also found the communication problems striking – and quite similar to those I saw while working at the Y. The film highlighted the miscommunication and bureaucratic hiccups that I saw so frequently at the Y – miscommunication about what forms to bring, where missing documents had gone, who said what and when. I realized how frustrating it must be to have such a lack of control over one's life and livelihood. I also realized that receiving public assistance can often be a job in itself. It requires a great deal of patience, time, and energy.

Many of the families featured in *Wage Slaves: Not Getting by in America* (2002) were not receiving public assistance, either because they did not believe in it or because they had tried and had ended up tangled in red tape. What I found most striking about this film was the number of single-parent families that were struggling to make ends meet. For many, divorce was the final straw that pushed them over the poverty line.

One story in particular was interesting to me – a single father raising his three children in Las Vegas, Nevada. Prior to his divorce, he had been a contractor making \$60-70,000 per year. He was unable to keep this job and also raise his children after his wife left, so he began working as a limousine driver, making \$10,000 or less per year. This comes down to a little over \$800 per month. At the YMCA, we were taught to question individuals if they claimed to be living off of anything less than \$1,000 per month. There was a general sense that this was an impossibly tight budget, and that the individual was probably leaving some information out. As you can imagine, this disconnect contributed to many of the communication problems we experienced. Granted, the single father featured in the documentary was also receiving food stamps, and this was in 2001, but his story still brings up an important point. At the Y, we always asked, “How do you pay for miscellaneous living expenses, such as toothpaste, new clothes, or deodorant?” This project has shown me that many simply do not buy these things. It may be possible to raise 3 kids on \$10,000 per year – largely because so much is compromised.

Working at the Y in a low-paying job gave me a sense that I “knew” what it was like to never have any money. This project has reminded me of the ways that my life is privileged. As I initially began this project, I thought that simply understanding public assistance, and making the brochure, would be enough to enable me to communicate effectively with individuals living on public assistance or working low-wage jobs. I have since learned that an understanding of this

experience, of what this life is like, is equally important. So, knowing what I now know, what would I do differently if I still worked at the Y? I would have more patience; if these conversations about finances were hard for me, they were probably harder for the individual struggling to make ends meet. I would employ my new knowledge about therapeutic use of self and show more empathy. I would remember that living off of \$1,000 per month may indeed be possible – possible, but incredibly difficult. Finally, I would not be afraid to ask questions. Being vague and uncomfortable is so much less effective than being straightforward, clear, and honest. I am not “done”, now that this project is over. Becoming more culturally competent, becoming actively anti-racist, becoming aware of what life is like for those individuals struggling to make ends meet – these are lifelong goals. I hope to continue to take what I have learned through this project and to challenge myself to learn more – through volunteering, through reading, and through dialogue with others. I hope to become an occupational therapist who works to eradicate inequalities in health care due to race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender.

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